

American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, And The Crisis Of The 1860s

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Review

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The 1860s: A Decade of Crisis

U.S. historians have long employed the phrase “the Decade of Crisis” to refer to the 1850s. This tumultuous decade began with the Compromise of 1850 and ended when South Carolina seceded from the Union. However, used in this way, “Decade of Crisis” refers principally to events within the United States and only occasionally considers developments that occurred beyond the borders of the U.S. The essays composing *American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin American, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860s* suggest the 1860s were as much a Decade of Crisis as the 1850s, and perhaps more so, because an interrelated series of conflicts unfolded in stunning similar ways throughout the Atlantic World.

Editor Don H. Doyle, author of the well-regarded *The Cause of All Nations* (2015), explains that *American Civil Wars* “joins the international turn among historians endeavoring to understand the modern past as something more than the sum of national histories” (1). Since the advent of the transnational turn in U.S. historiography, historians have become more attentive to the international dimensions of U.S. history. Scholars interested in the U.S. Civil War have explored the international elements of the war and the relationship between the U.S. Civil War and other conflicts. The essays in this volume, which correctly posit the entangled nature of their subject matter, should be seen as the productive result of the internationalization of U.S. history. In addition, Doyle notes that the crises of the 1860s featured three common political and social questions: the future of slavery, the future of the republican experiment, and sovereignty. As he astutely comments, “far more than just territory and geopolitical advantage were at stake in the global contest among rival European

empires; the future of slavery and survival of democracy also hung in the balance” (8).

To say this volume has a broad scope is an understatement. Jay Sexton begins by analyzing the relationship between the U.S. Civil War and the rise of U.S. power. Although the U.S. Civil War was “the prerequisite to the emergence of the United States as a world power” (30), Sexton notes that one of the most striking elements of the postbellum period was “the crablike trajectory of the era’s foreign policy” (25). Plans for projecting U.S. power abroad, he explains, often gained little traction. Thus, “the institutions and political relationships forged during the war did not consistently lead to the accumulation and projection of national power, at least in the short term” (30), although the U.S. Civil War was nevertheless a watershed moment.

Howard Jones refutes a narrative that has become common: Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation effectively stymied British and French intervention in the U.S. Civil War. In fact, Jones contends, European intervention appeared almost certain at two points: when British Prime Minister Palmerston considered mediation in the fall of 1862 and when Emperor Napoleon III pushed for an armistice. Jones argues that the Emancipation Proclamation added momentum to foreign intervention because the British and French feared a racial conflict. In sum, Jones urges historians to rethink the claim that Lincoln “prevented British and French intervention by steering the war into an antislavery direction” (51).

Patrick J. Kelly examines Confederate imperial ambitions. For a time, Kelly asserts, the rebels renounced expansionism, something historians have failed to explain. Kelly argues that, despite the expansionist dreams of the antebellum U.S. South, Confederate authorities believed expansionism unnecessary and counterproductive. Furthermore, he demonstrates the weakness of the Confederacy as a hemispheric power. By the end of the U.S. Civil War, Kelly concludes, “it had become apparent to many Southern leaders that the ability of the South to achieve its interests in the Americas depended upon a close alliance with the United States” (76).

Essays by Richard Huzzey and Stève Sainlaude complement Jones and Kelly’s contributions. Huzzey contends that the British shied away from intervention because of a combination of principles and realpolitik. Furthermore, he notes that “the projection and illusion of British power in the Americas was dimming even as commercial links, especially to the United States and Brazil,

brightened” (100). Sainlaude contends that French Emperor Napoleon III considered intervention in Mexico one of his highest priorities. Sainlaude’s essay highlights an example of a war within a war; between Napoleon III who “considered the Confederates to be his natural allies” (114) and Ministers of Foreign Affairs Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys who “argued that a southern victory would pose a greater threat to France’s Grand Design than a unified United States” (115).

The late Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and Anne Eller provide important insights about the Spanish Empire. Like the French, the Spanish took advantage of U.S. divisions to meddle in the Americas in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine. Although the Spanish attempt to annex Santo Domingo was supposed to solidify slavery and sovereignty in Cuba and Puerto Rico, it instead, Schmidt-Nowara argues, played an important “role in the protracted crisis of Antillean slavery and Spanish dominion” (125). Eller provides a detailed examination of this disastrous foreign adventure. She might have drawn stronger comparisons between the situations in the Dominican Republic and Mexico, especially in terms of how occupiers attempted to deal with guerrilla violence, but her essay illustrates the costs of Spain’s annexation attempt. In describing how Cubans and Puerto Ricans drew inspiration from the Dominican War of Restoration, Eller offers another reminder of the interconnected nature of the crises of the 1860s.

Erika Pani analyzes Mexican Conservatives and their monarchist sentiments. For Pani, the most remarkable feature of Mexican monarchism was its inconspicuousness, stilted rhetoric, and the fact that, until the 1860s, monarchy was basically an object of scorn. However, in a world seemingly spinning out of control, “Conservatives tried to sell monarchy as a system that could domesticate the alluring but dangerous values of the new order” (176). Pani asserts that “the crisis of the 1860s engendered different political responses that sought to deal with the transformations of markets and production, and discipline the powerful revolutionary currents of nationalist, republicanism, and socialism” (180). Although monarchism failed, she concludes that the construction of a Mexican nation-state was not an inevitable outcome.

Hilda Sabato opens by asserting that by the 1860s, America was basically a republican hemisphere. She contends that “a crucial dimension of nineteenth century republicanism occupied center stage during the decade: the model of defense and the role of armed institutions in the polity” (186). In the aftermath of the revolutions of the 1810s and 1820s, Spanish-Americans believed citizens

should defend the republic. However, by the 1860s, militias coexisted uneasily with professional armies. Therefore, as Sabato concludes, the 1860s anticipated issues that would arise when liberals “sought to centralize authority in a strong national state that would monopolize the use of force, discipline the elites, and reshape the citizenry” (198).

Matt Childs and Rafael Marquese discuss the impact of the U.S. Civil War on Cuba and Brazil. Childs argues that three events placed Cuba on the path to ending slavery: the Lyons-Seward Treaty of 1862, a period of reform politics in metropolitan Spain, and the Ten Years’ War extending the possibility of slaves emancipating themselves. “The crisis of the 1860s born out of the U.S. Civil War,” he asserts, “most certainly began the process that resulted in the destruction of Cuban slavery” (218). Marquese argues that, for a time, the U.S. served as a protective wall for Brazilian slavery. However, the political impact of the U.S. Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction and the impact of U.S. economic growth, triggered a crisis of slavery in Brazil. Marquese’s conclusion is striking: “without the U.S. Civil War, the end of slavery in Brazil would not have happened the way it did. It seems likely that the institution would have continued into the twentieth century—and perhaps beyond” (240).

There is much to like and little to criticize about this volume. However, one critique should be raised. Throughout the volume, there is some inconsistency in how the authors name a certain conflict. Is the conflict fought in the United States from 1861 – 1865 the “American” Civil War or the “U.S.” Civil War? In a book dedicated to the study of *American* Civil Wars, it seems somewhat problematic to use “American” to refer exclusively to the U.S. conflict. After all, many people at the time, as several chapters illustrate, saw the U.S. Civil War, the French Intervention, the War of Restoration, and the Ten Years’ War as interrelated and would have considered all of them *American* civil wars.

Critique aside, this is an important book. Doyle has succeeded in assembling a collection showcasing the positive results of scholarly collaboration and how transnational methodologies can enable historians to pose new answers to old questions. This volume will open up additional conversations and inspire other historians to pursue the themes raised by the contributors. These essays are accessible enough to be successfully utilized in upper-level undergraduate seminars and will also work well in graduate seminars.

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